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ABSTRACT

In the study described in this paper, the attitudes of evening college students toward urban issues were assessed. Students' responses concerning assertiveness in reconciling such issues as housing, transportation, environment, poverty and the urban/suburban relationship in the New York metropolitan area were measured in a pre and post test attitude scale. A program was devised for increasing the knowledge and awareness of adult students about urban concerns. The students were organized into two groups in which they attempted to research and make recommendations about improving the ways the nation's urban areas are developing, and about ways to enhance the urban process. Correspondence on these issues was conducted with urban politicians. Students, it was found, reached a more realistic understanding of urban problems than they had originally possessed. This program is cited as an example of the way urban problems may be corrected through education. (Author/GC)

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TEACHING ABOUT URBAN ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

"Teaching About Urban Issues"

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This study assessed attitudes of evening college students toward urban issues such as housing, transportation, environment, poverty and cities/suburbs. A pre and post test attitude scale measured students' responses concerning assertiveness in reconciling urban issues in the New York metropolitan region. Students became more optimistic in their ability to resolve urban issues as well as becoming more global in their outlook in contrast to their pre-test parochialism about city problems.

Student groups of three to five addressed these urban issues. The book "How to Save Urban America" was the cornerstone in their projects. Edited by William Caldwell the questions in the book were reactions to prospects for the Second Regional Plan in the year 2000. Regional Plan Association (RPA), a voluntary citizens organization, sponsored the five films shown to the public in 1963 and seen by the entire class. "Choices for '76" was an outgrowth of this participatory process.

"Choices for '76" addresses two of the nation's most critical needs: ameliorating the way our largest urban areas are developing and enhancing the democratic process itself. If this can be done in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Urban Region, it can be done anywhere in the country. This project could be a major advance for all or urban America.

"TEACHING ABOUT URBAN ISSUES"

The New York Metropolitan region has 17.2 million residents making it the largest in the world. It includes New York City, Long Island, Southwestern Connecticut, Southeastern New York state and northern New Jersey. Between 1970 and 1974, however, some 635,000 more people left the New York area than entered it. This steady loss in population, jobs, bank deposits and tax bases has created a fiscal fiasco which almost culminated in bankruptcy even to the present. Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia have experienced similar declines so this study could demonstrate planning methodologies for them. It could be a major advance for urban education.

Adults often feel powerless and depressed about problems of living in metropolitan areas. Concerns such as taxes, pollution, crime and social service costs confront them in their daily lives but ignorance precludes citizens from attacking these issues. Indifference feeds on this ignorance and causes people to be preoccupied with their self-interests. "The Republic can be remade in the classroom" said Alfred North Whitehead. Therefore one of the goals of adult education is to train adults to become better citizens who'll contribute to the overall well-being of society.

The attitude scale administered at the beginning and end of class projects measured (1) their feelings about solving urban issues and (2) orientation toward problem solving. The latter pin-pointed respondents as either self-centered or society-focused as in statement "I like use of my auto rather than depending on public transit." Numerical ratings from 0 to 4 were assigned to the format students responded to as either strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree or strongly agree. Both the assertiveness and society-orientation portions of the scale were set up in this forced-choice set.

Mean gains significant at the five and one percent levels were observed on the results of this same attitude scale conducted at the conclusion of their projects for the assertiveness and society-orientation scales, respectively. Using the "difference method" procedure, the t-test revealed these gains. Students grew in their confidence to solve urban problems and attained a broader view towards their large cities as part of a region in which state/federal resources would have to be tapped to rescue New york City.

Films were shown on television to residents of the New York City area with questions on ballots which they were to answer regarding urban concerns. Regional Plan Association, a voluntary citizens' organization supported by individual membership, corporate subscriptions, foundation and government grants, sponsored this five film series through its research to improve the environmental, economic and social conditions of the 31 county urban region. The questions were reactions to prospects for the Second Regional Plan in the year 2000. A committee of 125 diverse leaders evaluated these research and policy proposals. "Choices for '76" was an outgrowth of this participatory progress.

Mature evening students in this study were organized into groups based on geographical residence and attempted to answer two critical needs: improving the way our largest urban areas are developing and enhancing the democratic process itself. If this can be done in this study, it could be replicated elsewhere. The class studied the major issues of Housing, Transportation, Poverty, Environment and Cities/Suburbs in the "Choices for '76" study.

In the Housing group focus was made on the elderly in affording adequate shelter. They also interviewed oldsters in their residences along with using an audial slide presentation to describe this emotionally-laden topic. Students commented they had moved to the suburbs to flee low-income housing areas but many had overlooked the elderly. Encouraged by unethical business practices and inflamed

by ignorance, low income housing has become the Higher Hell of Surburbia.

The suburbanites' love of rubber wheels over steel ones undergirded the obstacles of implementing mass transit and highlighted the discussions on transportation modes. Even a rise in tolls and gasoline prices would not deter commuters from using their privately owned vehicles.

A professionally produced television show depicting our inscrutable welfare system was the platform for discussion in the poverty study. Participants began to realize the exasperations illiterate persons had to confront in obtaining financial aid.

Maximum realism was achieved when a garbage man and sanitation engineer prepared slides obtained during their jobs in their description of the environment. They demonstrated the complex and interdependent factors contributing to visual, auditory, air, water and land pollution spawned by poor waste disposal and poorly planned, disproportionate population growth.

In the cities/suburbs report, the central issue revolved around a choice between an urban region spread homogenously with one central city dependent on private vehicles or city-scale centers in outlying counties with more public transportation, less social contrast, and less intrusion of nature by man. A local councilman running for election was depicted on an audio-visual slide presentation. Opportunities for grandstanding and vote-getting heightened his enthusiasm. After semester was over, some students were invited to the office of a New York state senator to discuss the issues raised in correspondence.

Students scoring in the high, middle, and low ranges of the scales were interviewed as to the reasons for their responses. On the assertiveness scale the following were typical of the range indicated:

> High: "I feel now I want to make politicians more accountable...We're all in this together." "With a positive attitude and being truthful, he could get people to be positive."

Moderate: "Housing could have had more effect had we gone to places like Jersey City to examine homes on the site." "Instructor brought changes and different motivational techniques to make subject more comprehensible."

Low: "One couldn't do it but a group of people has strength of numbers. Project revealed that not everything could be done except through power groups who run the country." "Suprised at so much opposition to low-income housing because 90% of my police calls are for the elderly living alone who've been injured. A housing development would be self-protective for the aging."

Concerning the changes from a conservative, local control attitude towards a government influenced posture, the following emanated:

High: "I realized that everything must come together before you challenge stereotypes and accept the inevitable, e.g., racial misunderstandings must be solved before housing solutions can be reached; everything has to be seen in its entirety." "Suburbanites don't grasp what goes on in city or what urban dwellers have to endure. The group projects enable people to have everything in front of them (which helped them appreciate problems)."

Moderate: "General exposure to projects revealed things aren't like papers have depicted them, especially the one concerning low income housing." "Very realistic movies and sessions communicated well to me with the teacher remaining non-judgmental."

Low: "To get any problems resolved, it's who you know, not what you know." "I'm money conscious - if I pay taxes, do I really get more for it?" "When I pay for environmental conservation, will it really be cleaner?"

Racial and ethnic stereotypes were the silent but often squeaky planks in their platforms on volatile issues of welfare, low-income housing, and regional planning. This approach compelled students to stare at some acculturated ideas that had accumulated from traditional biases, fragmented information, and misperceptions. Perhaps students will now employ these methodologies to scrutinize other prejudices in a rational manner.

The failure of the cities to provide for the needs of the vast populace necessitates a demographic shifting about which the suburban complaint is, "We've worked too hard to escape (from the city) -- we can't jeopardize our financial status by letting 'them' in!" Once the problem of THEY is explored as to identity, cause and effect to suburbia, the potential for growth is enhanced with a consequent re-

lief in tension. When erroneous statements such as the above were uncovered, it was observed that gradual shifting of opinions had taken place.

A positive thrust of suburban inquiry into shifting populations from city to surrounding areas can indeed be accomplished through education. Both the melting-pot theory and the suburban ideal are essentially political clamps to our American system. The East Baltimore experiments with combating inner-city blight were viewed favorably with respect to the resurgence of people-power through the ethnically motivated community groups in a New York Times article by Bob Kuttner (May 7, 1976). Once urban blight has been erased by the urban efforts with the support of banking institutions, business and labor, another interesting question is posed: "Will ethnic groups see urban renewal as a sanctuary against other ethnics, i.e. Blacks?"

Students could now address New York City's fiscal crisis by examining unresolved problems, viz. lack of effective housing policies, excessive social service costs and the erosion of tax base because of middle and business class exodus. Their correspondence and interviews with political leaders broadened their understanding of the democratic process. Students gained a sense of community by examining how urban problems affect the suburbs. They realized that we are all part of one region, and cooperative problem-solving tempered by social responsibility can contribute to a better quality of life for everybody.